'Mouse' device can help with word processing

With the increasing popularity of small computers in business offices, something rather unexpected frequently occurs. The computer is often purchased for use with accounting, spreadsheet or database programs — but a few months later it's being used primarily for **word processing** instead.

As a result, the word processing program you select may end up determining, to a large extent, the effectiveness of the entire installation. A relatively new invention — the "mouse" could increase productivity in this area.

Last week in this column, I mentioned that there are two word processing programs in particular — *WordPerfect* and *Microsoft Word* — that are most often recommended by experienced users and computer dealers. I noted that dealers like to sell WordPerfect because it seems to fit almost all business customers, no matter what their needs are. And most users like the program, even though it is not as easy to use as some "lower-end" products.

Word features mouse

Microsoft Word, the other program often recommended, is one of the only programs available for the IBM PC (and compatible small computers) that features a "mouse" — a small hand-held device that moves the cursor on the screen when you move it along your tabletop. Though the program also works without it, it's the mouse that makes the program worth considering for office applications.

As with WordPerfect, I tested the program extensively for both normal and advanced office applications. Here are the results:

✔ Once you get used to it, the mouse is a very handy device. It takes less key strokes than WordPerfect to do many common actions. Moving around copy and selecting commands is easier to do.

✔ Despite an excellent, on-screen, computer-aided learning tutorial, Microsoft Word took much longer to learn than WordPerfect.

✔ The screen image of your text is exactly

the way it will appear later on your paper — even when right-justifying columns. If you add or delete words from the middle of a paragraph, for example, the entire paragraph is reformatted instantly. This feature is missing from WordPerfect.

✔ On the negative side, the on-line spell-checking feature is weak compared to others on the market. You can only spell-check an entire document at a time; there is no way to verify the spelling of a single word while you are in the middle of drafting text. Other state-of-the-art word processing programs are much better in this area.

✔ Also on the negative side, scrolling within long documents is slow and inefficient. And page breaks for printing are not automatically inserted as you go along (this is only done on the screen if you give the "print repaginate" command, which is cumbersome).

✔ And finally, because of its complexity, and several sections of the manual that are downright confusing, I don't think it is a good program for a person new to computers.

A word of caution: The part of the program that installs the mouse device when you turn on the system does not work with all IBM compatible hardware. I tried to use the program with a Tallgrass Technologies hard disk unit attached to an IBM PC and obtained disastrous results.

The file directory was damaged during installation and the hard disk had to be reformatted before it was usable again. Tallgrass acknowledged the mouse problem and suggested that other hard disk systems might also be incompatible with it.

Which is best?

When you speak to people who have taken the trouble to learn and use Microsoft Word, you often find they've been seduced by the mouse. This confirmed my own experience: After being spoiled by driving with "automatic transmission," it is difficult to go back to manual stick-shift.

The analogy is a good one, because even though some automobile drivers disdain automatic and like the "power" of manual, most people — especially those who never learned anything else — are quickly hooked by the automatic features. This might account for the intense loyalty that some users feel for the mouse-assisted Apple Macintosh computer, despite its shortcomings. Old-time IBM users are just now being tempted by similar ease-of-use features.

In conclusion, I found both WordPerfect and Microsoft Word to be exceptionally good programs for business situations and both worthy of recommendation.

In situations where more advanced spell-checking features are important, where you are looking for a good all-purpose word processing program, or where the operator is new to computers, WordPerfect is a better choice.

But in situations where people are a bit more experienced with computers and are interested in trying the latest and greatest programs, Microsoft Word is the winner.

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant and editor of the Executive Computing Newsletter, published by the Association of Computer Users. He can be reached at ACU, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.